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ABSTRACT

Arguing that developmental writing programs should remain rhetorical rather than philosophical, this paper reviews some issues in the history of rhetoric that are relevant to those who teach writing in open-door colleges. The paper begins with an explanation of some of the basic arguments between the Greek philosophers and the rhetoricians--Gorgias, the sophist; Plato, the idealist and utopian; and Aristotle, author of "The Rhetoric." The second part of the paper develops the concept of the rhetorical ideal of life, which is essentially an attitude of pluralism in conflict with the philosophical attitude of monism. The third part of the paper continues the discussion of the conflict between rhetoric and philosophy into the modern debate between pragmatism and positivism, arguing that traditional instruction in composition emphasizes philosophic positivism to the detriment of rhetorical pragmatism. The paper concludes with a discussion of some of the consequences of pragmatism for the teaching of developmental writing. (HOD)

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Living with Wolves:

Developmental Writing and the Rhetorical Ideal of Life

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Living with Wolves:
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In the community college district where I work, I recently participated in a district-wide effort to rewrite the objectives of each course so that, in some way, all course objectives would come together in a unifying document called "Skills for Living." Though the document is well intentioned, it seems predictably naive and romantic in what it considers "living." The "skills" listed in the document all are classified under very serious-sounding headings, such as "Living with Self," "Living with Others," "Living As a Consumer," and so on. You get the idea. It's as though we are teaching our students to be serious, responsible, sober cogs in the wheel. I suggested that we add a new heading, "Living with Wolves." (And let me point out that Thoreau was not serious when he claimed that some of us are "too gentle to live among wolves"; that statement is just the hyperbole of a skillful rhetorician.) I proposed "Living with Wolves" because I think we in the open-door college, and especially in developmental education, need to eschew the lofty, philosophical, pretentious ideals of documents like "Skills for Living"; we need to speak like the pragmatic realists that we are. "Living with Wolves" is what we should be about, for we are trying to teach to our students some basic techniques for survival in a less-than-ideal world.

Of course, I didn't expect my suggestion to get very far. "Living with Wolves" just doesn't sound

serious enough to be included in a document as philosophical as "Skills for Living." The phrase would strike the authors of "Skills for Living"as frivolous, cynical, smart-alecky. In short, it seems rhetorical. And that was exactly my intent: In the path of a relentless philosophical steamroller like "Skills for Living," which is trying to unify all the diverse elements which exist within its sphere of influence, I wanted to see the writing program resist philosophy and remain rhetorical. I wanted to see us remain true to a tradition 2500 years old--rhetoric, and the rhetorical ideal of life.

My remarks today will attempt to review some issues in the history of rhetoric which are relevant to us as we struggle to teach writing in open-door colleges. Part One of my discussion will explain a few of the basic arguments between rhetoricians and philosophers which began in ancient Greece and continue into this century. The central figures in the debate are Gorgias, the sophist; Plato, the idealist and Utopian; and Aristotle, author of the Rhetoric. Part Two will develop the concept of the rhetorical ideal of life, which is essentially an attitude of pluralism in conflict with the philosophical attitude of monism. Part Three continues the discussion of the conflict between rhetoric and philosophy into the modern debate between pragmatism and positivism. I will argue that traditional instruction in composition emphasizes philosophic positivism to the detriment of rhetorical pragmatism. Part Four will focus largely on several consequences of pragmatism for those of us who teach developmental writing. I will leave you with an annotated bibliography of the works that I mention, so that you will have a list of books and articles that you might want to

look for in your library or ask your librarian to order.

Part One:
Gorgias, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle

Most of us, at one time or another, were taught that the western philosophical tradition began with Socrates and his student Plato. If we take "philosophy" to be the search for absolute truth and the unity of all things, then we should admit that it probably did begin with Socrates. But what we usually are not taught is that the intellectual tradition of rhetoric is much older and that it, contrary to philosphy, is not interested in absolute truth and the unity of all things. Little of what the pre-Socratic rhetoricians wrote still exists, perhaps discarded by philosophers who thought their ideas useless, perhaps destroyed by philosophers who felt threatened by their ideas. Consider these un-Platonic thoughts from the sophist Gorgias, who makes three claims: "first, nothing actually exists; second, even if something actually did exist, it would be incomprehensible to man; third, even if comprehension could be attained, it could certainly not be articulated or explained." The world of Gorgias, then, is a world of uncertainty, a world without unity. It is a world of pluralism, discovery, change, and dialogue--a world of rhetoric.

Socrates, of course, reacted against this kind of thinking in two of Plato's dialogues, The Gorgias and The Phaedrus. In both, rhetoric is criticized as "flattery" and deplored because it refuses to assume that there is ever a single truth in any situation. In fact, Socrates

is correct in some of what he says: Rhetoric, contrary to philosophy, assumes a number of possible explanations for any situation, a number of potential truths. "Truth" is established through argumentation and negotiation; "truth" is the explanation that a number of people are persuaded to believe. Not so for Socrates and Plato. They wish to establish philosophy as the way of knowing the absolute truth, and they do not want to be regarded as mere rhetoricians. So they construct an elaborate and successful case against rhetoric; they conclude that the only good rhetoric is that which helps to convince the masses of the philosopher's wisdom. Western philosophy, then, from its very birth, has held rhetoric in low esteem. At his very best, the rhetorician is not more than the philosopher's assistant.

Aristotle, Plato's rebellious student, tried to elevate rhetoric to an equivalent status with philosophy. His definition of rhetoric seeks to correct Plato's. Aristotle writes: "its function is <u>not</u> to persuade but to <u>discover</u> the available means of persuasion in a given case." In other words, persuasion is not the primary task of rhetoric; discovery is. The rhetorician is not a flatterer, out to win arguments by any means necessary; the rhetorician is a discoverer, an inventor, a thinker concerned with particular situations and not with universal truths. Furthermore, Aristotle writes: "Rhetoric is the <u>antistrophe</u> of dialectic." In other words, rhetoric turns against philosophy, even to the point of undoing it. Rhetoric rejects philosophy's assumption of absolute truth and the unity of all things. Rhetoric seeks pragmatic knowledge, not universal truth. But Aristotle's effort failed. His <u>Rhetoric</u> has been

virtually ignored by philosophers. And even when it has been read, it has been interpreted and translated very conservatively. Samuel Ijsseling's Rhetoric and Philosophy in Conflict is a fine report on the battle between these two modes of intellectual inquiry, a battle which has lasted well over two millenia; Ijsseling is able to illustrate how rhetoric has continued to be attacked and dismantled, but has never vanished. Ijsseling also shows the beginning of its restoration in our own century.

Part Two:
The Rhetorical Ideal of Life

In The Motives of Eloquence, Richard Lanham claims that the history of our civilization is a drama played out by two competing drives within human nature: the drive to be serious and the drive to be playful--philosophy and rhetoric. My point in this paper, the point I am moving toward, is that we in our teaching have aligned ourselves too much with the seriousness of philosophy and that we tend to ignore our own tradition, the intellectual playfulness of the rhetorician. In this section of my paper, I want to explain the rhetorical ideal of life and how it differs from the philosophical ideal of life.

First, let us consider the basic components of the philosophical ideal of life. The philosopher's intellectual motivation is the search for absolute truth. She assumes that her world is unified, that it has a center. Her goal is to reach that central point where she will know the universal truth. She will make her way there with logic and empirical facts, the tools of science. She

will eschew uncertainty. She will hold to the tenet that two competing ideas cannot both be true. Through logic and empirical testing, she will believe she has "proved" the truth claims of one idea and denied the truth claims of the other. She will believe that her conclusions are purely logical, that they have nothing to do with rhetoric. But, like a tightrope walker, she will never be able to look at her feet, for if she does, she will see that the wire supporting her is held up by rhetoric.

Philosophic truth claims are arrived at deductively, through Socratic dialectic--major premise, minor premise, conclusion. What the philosopher chooses to ignore is how the truth claims of the premises are established. They cannot all be established deductively, for there would have to be a first principle, an undeniable starting point for all reasoning. Moreover, premises cannot all be established empirically, for our senses are imperfect and biased by social forces which we cannot control. The bottom line to Socratic dialectic, then, is this: Syllogistic premises are established rhetorically in social, linguistic transactions conducted between and among people with common concerns. Thomas Kuhn, in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, calls these socially established first principles "paradigms," and emphasizes their rhetorical foundation. The philosopher, as I just said, chooses to ignore the rhetoric in her quest. Even the modern existentialist, trapped in an absurd world, assumes that she has been "shut out" of a world of absolute truth, and thus mourns her "loss."

The rhetorical ideal of life, however, assumes no universal center, searches for no absolute truth, and

strives for no ideal goal. The rhetorician thinks "about those things which offer alternative possibilities" and he shapes "this habit into a doctrine of antilogy, the ability to argue with equal skill on either side of a question"(2). Antilogy, then, replaces formal logic. Alternatives replace unities. Lanham contends, "For rhetorical man, there is no such thing as a fact. To perceive is to color with intention"(20). When Lanham says our perception is colored with intention, he means only that we tend to see what we want to see and overlook what we don't want to see. Thus, there is no such thing as a fact, true and absolute. A fact is a social phenomenon; only those things on which members of a group agree may claim the status of fact. That status, however, is not absolute and universal; it is temporary and social. Therefore, the rhetorician's world is social and linguistic. He is interested not in absolute truth but in what society holds to be true and how that social consensus can be manipulated through language. He seeks not so much to change people's minds but to change people's selves. So his tools are more those of the poet than those of the scientist. And his attitude is more playful than serious.

Part Three:
Pragmatism and Idealism

New French Theory, which is more rhetoric than philosophy, uses two common occupations to represent the differences between the two intellectual traditions which I have been discussing. The engineer is the symbol of philosophy; the fix-it man, the bricoleur, is the symbol of

rhetoric. Jacques Derrida concludes, "it must be said that every discourse is bricoleur" and that "in this sense the engineer is a myth"(1978;285). In other words, he claims that no discourse is entirely philosophic and rational; it must also be rhetorical and pragmatic. Also, he claims that philosophy is a myth, an invention of rhetoric. My questions, then, are these: Which do we uphold when we teach developmental writing? Do we uphold the philosopher's quest for absolute truth? Or do we uphold the rhetorician's struggle to find whatever works in a particular case? Do we teach philosophic idealism or rhetorical pragmatism? I hope we would all answer the latter, but I fear that in our classes we much more often emphasize the former.

James Kinneavy's A Theory of Discourse is perhaps the most influential book on composition currently being studied. And it, as much as any other book, epitomizes the philosophic spirit of modern composition theory and pedagogy. It conceives of good writing as unambiguous; there is, in Kinneavy's theory, always one aim which dominates a particular discourse, never two or more, at least not in good writing. But on the contrary, our purposes, our motives, are usually to some degree ambiguous; rarely are we, as writers, always certain of our aims and completely in control of our words. Indeed, often in our best work our writing overtakes our intention; we lose control. When we finish writing, we know more than we did when we began; only when we read what we have written can we know what we think. There is no way Kinneavy's theory can account for this kind of discovery in writing. His theory assumes that we know our aim and what we want to communicate before we write,

and that the composition instructor's job is to teach students what the aims of discourse are (there are only seven) and how their thoughts should be organized so that the aim can be accomplished, or so that the thesis can be demonstrated.

Keith Fort, in an article titled "Form, Authority, and the Critical Essay," argues that the role of the thesis is overstated in current composition theory and pedagogy. He observes that in most writing classes, "the key rule is that there must be a thesis which the essay proves"(622). The schematic plan of a typical college essay resembles an organizational chart of a corporation or a military unit, where the thesis is the authority who marshals the troops to fit a predetermined pattern. Fort argues that when we teach this traditional essay pattern, we are also teaching students to accept the authoritarian hierarchies which seek to govern and control them. I agree with Fort. The traditional essay, designed to demonstrate a single thesis, is an example of writing governed by philosophy rather than by rhetoric. When I claim that the traditional essay is unrhetorical, I do not mean that it is unpersuasive; rather, I mean that it is bent of "proving" the "truth" of a single statement. A truly rhetorical essay would seek to be more exploratory, not as Kinneavy conceives of exploratory, but as William Zeiger conceives of it in his recent article in College English. Kinneavy's definition of exploratory writing does not allow the discourse to ask questions freely; Zieger's does. Exploratory writing as Zeiger conceives of it allows a student the opportunity to be pragmatic, rather than forcing her to pretend to be scientific; she is able to practice rhetoric as Aristotle conceives of it:

"not to persuade, but to discover the available means of persuasion in a given case."

Richard Rorty, in his recent collection of essays, Consequences of Pragmatism, argues that we are entering a post-philosophical age, an age in which both Platonism and positivism give way to rhetoric and pragmatism. Pragmatism, according to Frank Lentricchia, "is a rejection of hierarchical structure itself, of the stabilizing (kingly) forces of structure which would always stand safely outside structure--outside the game, but ruling the game. Pragmatism is a commitment to the openness of time and a chance for change"(3). He continues, "to be a pragmatist is in a sense to have no theory."(4). Both of these modern thinkers, then, seem to concur with Fort and Zeiger in challenging the notion that writing, or inquiry, ought to be guided by a single thesis or a single theory. Instead, the writer should become a bricoleur, a jack-of-all-trades, able to respond in different ways as situations change. One theory, one set of rules, one modus operandi is less than what our students need. The philosophical ideal of writing is less than what our students need.

Part Four:
Pragmatism, Developmental Writing, and Rhetorical Sense

If we are to be successful in teaching the art of "living with wolves," if we are to teach pragmatism, we need to help our students develop a capacity which I want to call rhetorical sense. Rhetorical sense,

as I conceive of it, has three components: self-understanding, social knowledge, and an ability to manipulate the basic conventions of text.

First, let's explore self-understanding. I don't want to propose a psychological or philosophical definition here, but a rhetorical one--one which understands the self in relation to others. Here I want to borrow a concept from George Dillon's book, Constructing Texts. Dillon suggests that all of us exist somewhere between two ideal states: the culture of utterance and the culture of text. Clearly, those of us at this meeting are much closer to the culture of text than are those we teach. But our students, by enrolling in college, express a desire to withdraw from the culture of utterance and enter the culture of text; facilitating that transition is, after all, the major function of higher education. We could say that anyone who is learning is undergoing this transition, that is, becoming part of the culture of text. If our students can understand themselves this way, as selves in transition, their perception of reading and writing may change. For one thing, they may begin to see a contradiction between being a college student and placing reading and writing rather low on their lists of personal priorities. Also, we may better be able to show them their improvement in writing and reading week-by-week. A person with no rhetorical sense is easily frustrated by writing, for he knows that his product is far from perfect. But a person with rhetorical sense knows that no product is ever perfect. This student is better able to see that her work now is better than what she could have produced a month earlier; she can see some relative

growth in her intellectual ability when she reads what she has written. She may not see any growth, however, if she only has the kind of feedback which points out to her how far her work is from some ideal norm of what good writing ought to be. Leaving the culture of utterance can be a solitary and frustrating journey; but the student who understands herself as a person in transition, a student with rhetorical sense, is better able to make the journey.

The second component of rhetorical sense is knowledge of how society works. A person without rhetorical sense too easily convinces himself that his particular opinion is the only correct one to hold; his intellectual development then becomes suffocated by ideology, dogma, theory. The person with rhetorical sense has just as many opinions as the other person, but she retains an open-mindedness that the other does not. Having been trained in antilogy, seeing alternatives in every argument, she can see that conflicting points of view can all be reasonable. She, then, is better able to work with her opponents in an effort to forge a new consensus on an issue. She is able to practice what Wayne Booth calls "the rhetoric of assent," meaning that she will try to find some common ground with her opponent by agreeing with him wherever she can before she debates him. Her opponent, in other words, will feel that she is on his side before the negotiations really begin. She understands that the person who practices pluralism and rejects monism will fare better than the person who does not, for ours is a pluralistic society in which change is always a matter of compromise. Furthermore, the person with rhetorical sense is

less frustrated by defeat, for she understands that no social consensus is permanent and that opportunities for change arise frequently.

The third component of rhetorical sense is an ability to manipulate ~~that~~ the basic conventions of text. George Dillon discusses seven differences between the conventions of utterance and the conventions of text. I will not attempt to summarize all of them; I just want to point out the confusion facing the writer without rhetorical sense. The basic distinction is the difference between face-to-face experience and face-to-page experience. Most of our students have had little meaningful face-to-page experience, so it is not surprising to see them approach writing as nothing more than transcribed speech. Their writing is repetitive, monotonous, non-opinionated, and loaded with non-standard usage. In other words, it is everything we expect their speech to be. We expect our partners in face-to-face encounters to be agreeable, informal, and not intellectually overbearing. We expect the experience to be friendly, pleasant, and generally superficial; none of us could tolerate a dozen or more genuinely deep and meaningful encounters every morning. But these are not our expectations in a face-to-page encounter. We expect the writer to be assertive, quick, logical, and able to conform, at least minimally, to standard written English. And we expect her "to have something to say." Our students just are not used to such expectations. They certainly do not have these expectations of others, for their face-to-page experience is very small. Our students learn to write more acceptably when they begin to understand and to share these expectations.

However, until they develop healthy reading habits, and more than just a marginal level of reading ability, they will not be able to share and understand these expectations. It is unrealistic to expect acceptable writing from a person who cannot see any meaning or value in a face-to-page experience. Such a person has no rhetorical sense in terms of face-to-page experience; he is unable to empathize with the role of the reader. Therefore, I believe that we who teach basic writing only frustrate ourselves when we allow students with poor reading skills to enroll in our classes if they they do not enroll in a reading class also. Writing instruction without reading instruction cannot help a student develop intellectual rhetorical sense.

Conclusion

In this half-hour, I have tried, first of all, to explain the difference between, and the conflict between, rhetoric and philosophy. I did this not to try to denigrate philosophy, but to try to remind my audience of rhetoric's tradition as a mode of intellectual inquiry. It is a mode of inquiry which looks for alternatives rather than unities, social consensus rather than absolute truth, and pragmatic rather than dogmatic analysis. I have also tried to develop what I mean by rhetorical sense, which should be the most important quality that we try to pass on to our students. Basic writers will make progress, I believe, only when we are successful in changing them as people: in helping them to adopt a pragmatic intellectual frame of mind and in helping them to find value in face-to-page encounters.